

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRB #0497/01 1631237
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 121237Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0261
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 000497

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG AND DRL/NESCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/11/2029

TAGS: PGOV PINR KDEM MO

SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION MANEUVERS OF PAM AND PM HIGHLIGHT THE RIVALRIES AND CONVOLUTIONS OF MOROCCAN POLITICS

Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The kickoff of the campaign for local elections in Morocco on May 29 was enlivened when the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) announced that it was withdrawing support from Prime Minister (PM) Abbas El Fassi's government, threatening a parliamentary crisis. The PAM, which was founded by King Mohammed VI confidant Fouad Ali El Himma, has kept the El Fassi government in power since the 2007 elections, although it did not join the government. Within hours, the King made a phone call of support to El Fassi, which the PM publicized, calming concerns of a possible government fall. While weakening the government, the withdrawal has had no immediate practical effect, with the sole PAM minister (a technocrat) remaining in government until the PAM suspended him on June 11. Most observers agree El Himma was trying to position the PAM as an outsider, running against the government in the elections. Observers are uncertain about whether these new disputes reflect escalating competition or are part of an elaborate charade, pre-cleared with the King.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy conversations and field visits suggest that participation in the election will likely be low. Most projections suggest the government will largely be left intact, with gains made by PAM, in its first major election, and modest gains by the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in the cities. Although criticized for being out of touch with voters, the PAM has registered the largest number of candidates and is poised to finish among the top four parties in Morocco. Should it pull off a substantial victory, it could mean the expected post election cabinet reshuffle might include new parties in the ruling national coalition. End Summary.

PAM Successfully Defends its Candidate Poaching

¶3. (SBU) PAM's ostensible reason for withdrawing its support for the government was to protest Ministry of Interior (MOI) efforts, with Prime Minister Abbas El-Fassi's support, to disallow the candidacies of PAM members under article 5 of the political party law. This law prevents parliamentarians who change their party affiliation during an elected term from running in local elections. Rather than debate policies, PAM electoral efforts, and those of all other parties, appear focused on recruiting the wealthiest and most well connected candidates, even if this means poaching them from other parties. Although newly born in 2008, the PAM has registered the largest number of candidates (over 16,000) for the local elections.

¶4. (SBU) The PAM accused the government of deliberately targeting its candidates. (Note: We have heard that the highest number of party jumpers to PAM were Istiqlal

candidates. End Note.) Some Embassy contacts also suggested that MOI's attempted use of article 5 may also have been a reprisal against the PAM, which had recently criticized the MOI and other parts of the government as part of a campaign strategy to position the PAM as a political "outsider." Socialist Forces Party (USFP) candidate Maghnaoui told POL LES that "many voters do not differentiate between local and legislative elections; so the PAM is using the entire (article 5) episode as a means to distance itself from the government and demonstrate to voters that it is providing an alternative." Nonetheless, the courts subsequently invalidated the rejection of PAM member candidacies, so it does not appear that anyone was prevented from running.

Government Stabilized with King's Support ...

¶5. (SBU) Official press reported on May 30 that King Mohammed VI called the PM the very next day to reiterate trust in him and the government "to pursue and intensify their efforts aimed at carrying out the reforms and large-scale projects, and serving the higher interests of the nation and citizens." The King's renewed trust will temporarily comfort the government and allow it to work in good conditions during the election period.

¶6. (SBU) Even though the government lacks a majority, the PAM's withdrawal of support for the government does not mean that El Fassi's cabinet will fall. For this to happen, the PAM would need to assemble enough parliamentarians to actively vote it down. RNI Secretary of State for Craft Industry Anis Birou explained that Parliament is at an even

split with 160 members of parliament (MPs) in the government coalition and 160 in the non-allied opposition and 3 independents. According to an Istiqlal party (PI) political bureau member, after the elections, PM El Fassi will start talks in the next few weeks with other political parties to form a new majority.

... but Weakened

¶7. (SBU) Although El-Fassi's government appears to have avoided its first real crisis since its creation in 2007, the PAM's move has certainly weakened the ruling coalition. On June 1, President of the Chamber of Deputies President Mustapha Mansouri, the leader of the more powerful lower house of parliament, who is also Chairman of governing coalition party Rally of National Independents (RNI), announced that RNI was ending the parliamentary alliance with the PAM that began in September 2008 after the PAM chose to withdraw support from the government. Their joint parliamentary group had been the Chamber's largest. The RNI had already refused a PAM request to oppose article 5. President of the Upper Chamber of Parliament and RNI member Maati Benkaddour said that RNIs choice to create a parliamentary alliance with the PAM had been purely tactical in order to stop a possible hemorrhage of their weakest members to the PAM for personal gains as so many other parties, members have done.

¶8. (SBU) Speculation about a possible future coalition breakup has also been fueled by indications that USFP may withdraw from the national government coalition if it does not do well in these elections. During this campaign, the USFP has been pushing a provocative call for constitutional reform, out of step with other government parties, and is acting like a party already in opposition. Several of our parliamentarian contacts believe that the USFP, which took a beating in the 2007 legislative elections, may be looking to rebuild itself in opposition if it makes a poor showing. However, these potential shifts will not necessarily dislodge Istiqlal and may only oblige the PM to secure new alliances in order to re-craft a new governing coalition and remain in power.

Disinterest in Elections across the Board

¶9. (SBU) According to multiple embassy contacts, voters in general seemed uninterested in the elections, where a candidate's personal popularity is more important than any political platform. PolOff found voters in the North and the Rif particularly disinterested. In Tetouan, PolOff heard politicians do not listen to voters and will likely show their frustration through a low voter turnout (between 15 and 20 percent). Candidates running on the PAM and PJD tickets were a bit more optimistic suggesting a higher participation rate (between 30-40 percent). In Tangier and elsewhere in the north, various other observers projected a voter participation rate anywhere between 30 and 50 percent. We believe that the voter participation for this election will be below the last communal election turnout of 54 percent)- making it difficult to avoid the conclusion that Moroccan voters are increasingly questioning the efficacy of elected officials in Morocco in general.

Forecasts from NDI and IRI

¶10. (C) In a June 9 meeting, National Democratic Institute (NDI) Country Director Jeff England told PolOff that his staff believed that the PAM and the Berber-reverent Popular Movement Party (MP) will be the big winners on Friday. England predicted that PJD and Istiqlal will perform &average,8 with the USFP and the tiny Socialism and Progress Party (PPS) making the poorest showings. England believes that the election participation rate will be between 37 and 50 percent, with a stronger showing in southern Morocco than in the northern regions.

¶11. (C) International Republican Institute (IRI) Country Director Jamie Tronnes opined on June 9 to PolOff that although the PAM has registered the most candidates throughout Morocco, they are focusing most of their efforts in the south and do not appear to have much ground support. On the other hand, Tronnes said that PJD is running a disciplined campaign in targeted regions, indicating more

experience and knowledge about campaign management. She predicted that the RNI would be a big winner in the North, especially in Taounate. Although PPS seems to have a large focus on youth, Tronnes suggested that neither it nor the tiny Constitutional Union party (UC) would be serious players in this election. Tronnes added that she felt the participation rate would be over 40 percent.

Important Race in Western Sahara

¶12. (C) A key race to watch is in the Western Sahara, where the election is administered as in Morocco. When the MOI appointed a new Wali in Laayone who had a long affiliation with El Himma, many wondered whether this presaged some kind of challenge to Kalihenna Ould Er Rachid, the controversial head of the Advisory Council for Sahrawi Affairs (CORCAS). Speculation intensified when El Himma arranged for a Sahrawi, Mohammed Sheikh Biadillah, to become formal leader and Secretary General of the PAM. However, the Er Rachid political machine is deeply entrenched because of its longtime control of a good part of the GOM resources and privileges in the territory. The PAM acquired a long list of candidates and is campaigning hard, but as of halfway through the campaign, local observers in and out of the administration expect the Er Rachid to hold on, keeping safe the dozen or so parliamentary seats that put the PM's Istiqlal party in position to lead the Moroccan government.

¶13. (SBU) Another interesting contest will take place in Fes, where Istiqlal strongman Mayor Hamid Chabat faces a

long-standing challenge from the PJD and a rising pressure from the PAM. Rallies and even recent clashes leave the impression that competition in Fes will be intense with all doing well compared to smaller parties, but unclear as to which will emerge as the biggest winner.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: Most potential voters continue to profess indifference and general dissatisfaction with the political parties and their elected representatives, at any level, and a majority will likely continue to stay home. We also expect a continuation of the substantial protest ballot phenomenon of the 2007 parliamentary election. Despite these defects, many see the results of this election as a harbinger of legislative elections in 2012. The newness of PAM and the potential impact of increased women candidates introduce new elements of unpredictability into the election outcome. However, based on our read of the political field, we expect the PAM to make substantial inroads at the local level in this, its first major, nationwide election, finishing among the top four parties. We also expect the PJD to finish with modest gains, RNI with minor loses, and USFP with loses. How much of these local results make affect a shake-up at the national level remains to be seen but will likely depend on the strength of PAM's gains. Istaqlal is likely to finish well locally and remain the ruling coalition leader nationally even if we see changes in coalition members. End Comment.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Moro_cco

Jackson